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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 2859
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0680
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0556
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1132
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 1808
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0590
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1331
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 001097

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, EUR/ACE, DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [SOCI](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: CATHOLIC CHURCH PLANS PUSH FOR
REGISTRATION

Classified By: CHARGE RICHARD E. HOAGLAND FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: A Vatican representative will come to Ashgabat on December 11 or 12 to formally request that the Turkmenistan government register the Roman Catholic Church. The requirement that the head of a religious organization be a Turkmenistan citizen still remains a major impediment to registration. U.S. assistance in response to Turkmenistan's request for expert advice to re-draft its Law on Religion to meet international standards and obligations would be one way to overcome this impasse. Despite its unregistered status, the Catholic Church is able to function, hold weekly services, and even provide instruction to potential converts, without government interference. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) A Vatican representative plans to come to Turkmenistan December 11 or 12 to formally ask that the Catholic Church be registered, Father Adrzej Madej, cultural attache at the Apostolic Nunciature, told us October 6. The main obstacle to registration in the past has been the fact that Turkmen law requires the head of a religious organization be a Turkmen citizen. Madej, who has lived in Turkmenistan for more than ten years, applied for Turkmen citizenship in the past, but was denied. And currently there are no priests who are Turkmenistani citizens. Madej had planned to ask his superiors to allow a local citizen member of the parish to serve as the head of the church for registration purposes (president of the parish council, for example), but he was told to put all efforts at registration on hold until after the December visit.

13. (C) Madej said Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Meredov previously had asked that the two sides find a way to resolve the impasse. Madej did not think the Vatican would settle for anything less than the law being repealed or for an exemption. He said church officials would probably also have problems with some of the reporting requirements mandated of registered organizations.

¶4. (U) Madej said registration would benefit the Catholic Church in Turkmenistan, because they would be able to build a church, bring in nuns, and hopefully, operate a school. Nevertheless, the church is able to function without registration. Attendance at weekly masses is about 100. Local membership is composed of 80% of those with Slavic ancestry and 20% ethnic Turkmen. The congregation is predominantly female.

¶5. (SBU) Although proselytizing by foreigners is illegal in Turkmenistan, the Catholic Church, nevertheless, is able to hold weekly classes for people interested in converting. In fact, in contrast to past years, when potential converts were subject to harassment by government officials, both the students and classes are undisturbed. Attendees, according to Madej, range from teenagers to adults. Most of the people heard about Catholicism by word of mouth or were referred by friends. About 30-40 people attend these weekly classes, 1/3 of whom are ethnic Turkmen. Madej insists that the students study for a minimum of five years to ensure they are sincere, before being baptized.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: It is a positive sign that the Catholic Church is able to function, even without registration. However, it may be difficult for the government to work around existing legislation to allow registration. U.S. assistance in response to Turkmenistan's request for expert advice to re-draft its Law on Religion to meet international standards and obligations would be one way to help overcome this impasse. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND